ON THE ROAD

Pic: George Bodnar

Bristling with pleasure

ZZ Top
Hammersmith Odeon

LET'S GET IT straight. ZZ Top are not heavy metal, neither vieux *nor* nouveau vague. *They come from the now all-but defunct tradition of Deep South boogie which gave the world the various treasures of the Allman Brothers, Lynyrd Skynyrd and Little Feat (who happen to be my favourite band of all time).*

While death was afflicting the aforementioned ZZ seem to have survived by dropping out for three years, cultivating their beards. Now they are back in undeniably nostalgic but utterly awesome shape — the most magnificent mighty-motion trio you could imagine. Judging by the pictures on my well-worn copy of 'Fandango' only the facial foliage and the hats have changed: Billy Gibbons and Dustry Hill have swapped a ten-gallon and a stetson for a more idiosyncratic black bowler/stovepipe hybrid and a floppy beret respectively.

I walked in to the middle of their opener, 'I Thank You', and the adrenalin was flowing in seconds. They don't play fast music on the whole, but very very strong. The great clear lines of their riffs move like the irresistible waves in mid-ocean and you the listener are out there adrift, endlessly rocking.

Whether you approach such music cynically or openly, as 'old-fashioned' or 'classic', I think you have to agree it presents a perfect illusion/artistic experience. You are born away on these thundering images sound-sensations of power, sea-storms, and yet it's as safe as a bath of milk. You know *you won't be overturned, it doesn't even threaten — you (except I'm presuming and I should have been saying 'I' all along) feel totally secure and totally content the moment you totally let go and sail on the glorious physical experience of it.*

And whosoever snobbishly spits on such short, happy moments is voting for inhibition, puritanism, pessimism and everything that's negative in our lives and souls.

Here endeth the first number (at least). If you know ZZ a volume will be spoken by simply saying that among the greats they played were 'Jesus Has Left Chicago', 'Heard It On The X', 'Nasty Dogs And Funky Kings', 'El Diablo', 'Cheap Sunglasses', 'Automobile' and 'Tush'. I specially admired Dusty Hill's fierce turns on vocals and superb finger-style bass stoking the pelvic-thrusting, grunting swing of it all — if Michaelangelo had played bass that's how he'd have expressed himself between assaults on the Cistine Chapel ceiling (or, if you want it a little less fanciful, he put me in mind of Captain Beefheart's Rockette Morton with his knowledge of how the bass can shape rather than just boom in rhythm).

Frank Beard was less startling but also added to the standard 'dependable' tags with overdrive surges on his two bass drums and brilliant cowbell shots that cut through everything and kicked mulishly for all their actual delicacy.

From where I sat (stage right) Billy Gibbons guitar was the only disappointment because it was too quiet and lost at times. Geoff Barton reported that from the centre aisles he was wonderful, so that deficiency was down to an American sound man who didn't know the venue and was deceived, by what he heard coming straight off the stage, into turning Gibbons down in the PA — things like that should be borne in mind when you see readers' letters saying 'Your reviewer, Claude Clothears, and me can't have been at the same show last week when etc.'

ZZ Top always were a great band. 'Fandango' would have been one of my Top 20 albums of the Seventies if anyone had asked. They are still operating at well over 90 per cent of their potential and if their rumoured return in the autumn comes off. . . be there.

PHIL SUTCLIFFE

The Movies
The Venue

THE MOVIES are excellent. Always have been excellent.

And yet to talk that way takes you back to thoughts of founder members Jon Cole and Julian Diggle's getting together at Cambridge University. The reviewer's tendency, even if you like them as I have done for five years now, is to append remarks such as professors put at the bottom of star pupils' essays.

Alpha plus, an extremely well considered argument. They are so clever, so classy. and yet I'm wondering now whether they are turning out to be the perpetual students of the scene, ever diligent, ever eager, but somehow never there on the day when they're supposed to be sitting their finals.

The Movies were excellent at The Venue and I've never enjoyed them less. It's not that they got stuck in the rut of the quality American influences they seemed to begin with, such as Steely Dan and Little Feat (bonds I love I should clarify). But I think they have made the wrong moves in terms of both their art and their commerciality.

The crucial change happened in '78 I think. They put out an album called 'Bullets Through The Barrier', their third and full of the confident, melodic, musicianly moodiness which had built them as solid following.

A few weeks later they were on the *Whistle Test* showcasing a couple of the songs and they had completley changed. The New Wave had caught up with them. They had speeded up, they were 'abrasive' and 'harsh'. The open-mindedness was admirable, but the style didn't suit them, though. The music is hot and it's lost its warmth. On reflection I realise they should have been Dire Straits, laying back when all about them were leaning forward; they had the time but they didn't have the inclination.

If this is a far too contextual approach for rock 'n' roll put it down to those initial ruminations on the Varsity Vales Of Academe. The Movies at the Venue played consummate skill and fierce energy. They got a lot of people dancing. Cole did some remarkable imaginative things with slide guitar (wrenching that noble but clichéd device into the modern world) while his partner Greg Knowles played more orthodox axe licks with a true passion. Diggle, the midfielder dynamo, gave his usual wondrous display on salsa percussion, harmonica, backing vocals and piano. V. good.

But all this effort has taken a Black And Decker sander to the finer points of their work where sheer soulful musicianship could take flight and transcend their lack of anything particular to say on the vertical front. 'Yoyo' and 'The Last Train' suffered. Only 'Have Another Body', slow and bass-heavy funk, suggested a strong new direction.

On the art/business balance they need to rediscover their atmosphere and have a hit single (necessarily in that order).

PHIL SUTCLIFFE

B. A. Robertson
Newcastle

IN A HOUSE two-thirds full and well papered the 15 rows who've come to pay homage to The Star rather than out of curiosity choose to demonstrate their devotion by tentative bottom of trouser grabbings and, inexplicably, presenting him with daffodils.

Fronting a punchy quartet of seasoned sessionmen, B A Robertson, the Max Wall of the plastic age, goes in for putting on a show that's at least equally balanced between rock and pantomime. Bozo he may be but Robertson has suss and a sharp self-de-preciating line in humour. The reason the chin is of Bruce Forsyth proportions is that Brian Alexander has his tongue firmly planted in it. In-jokey, even. Like, when he prefaces a pre-hit single with, "Long ago, before the days of Ian Dury impersonations. . ." Or, even more so, the *'Life was in a ruin/She loved Johnny Fruin'* lines from 'Bang Bang'. As less than one per cent of the listening public must know that 'Johnny' Fruin is the head of Robertson's record company, Warner Bros UK, that really does qualify as an in joke.

Another clever-dick trick that shows up periodically is the band striking up a familiar intro but then going into one of Robertson's own songs about approximately the same subject. So, for 'Walking Rover', guitarist Garth Watt-Roy peals out the riff for 'Walking The Dog'. (The number, incidentally, contains lines of the calibre of *'And I'm her pedigree chum'* and features a giant shaggy dog that for the end of the song quite naturally links up with Robbo and thw two of them soft-shoe shuffle off.) 'What The Kids' borrows from enough Beatles tunes to con the listener into thinking it's a tribute when actually it's a paean to young love, like the songs swiped from.

What else does Robertson do? 'Baby I'm a Bat' "Brings together the world of Noel Coward and the Clash". 'Transiberian Express' is a jab in the eye with a blunt poker for the Kremlin Kids, with a lot more that fall more into the area of musical cartooning (like the hits) than comedy as such.

There's a few 'serious' items — mainly Robertson's versions of the numbers he wrote for Cliff Richard OBE but it's by his off the wall stuff that we shall know him. Which is going to present problems. After all, Bennie Hill only ever had one 'Ernie', Clive Dunn only one 'Grandad'.

Still, Robertson is a fly laddie and probably has something up his elongated sleeve. He's a joker but he's got style. He kept me entertained.

IAN RAVENDALE

Clicks
Durham

'MONEY COMES first when you use punctuation marks'. ('Lies Don't Talk').

Now, I don't know what that means either, but Gary Chaplin isn't too bothered because nothing about Clicks is easy. They dress like the Skids but sure don't play like them. The original monniker for Chaplin's post-Penetration band was Iron Curtain, which seemed sorta suitable for the austre landscape that they painted. 'Clicks' is instantly disposable and poppy, designed maybe to lull prospective listeners into a false sense of security.

Penetration I mention as a hook to keep you from flipping over to the bondage pants ads. Other than Gary Chaplin writing and guitaring for the original Ferryhill Four and fulfilling the same function (plus singing) with Clicks there are absolutely no similarities at all. The Chaplin of the Penetration days who came up with goodies like 'Don't Dictate' and 'Firing Squad' is gone forever, it seems.

The new band vears at right angles away from the high powered techniques used in those numbers and lands squarely in the avant garde/arty farty (delete according to prejudices) corner occupied by the likes of the Pop Group and PIL. Simultaneously simple and complex, there's shades of the Angry Young Man In Torment here.

Instrumentally Clicks have me well confused. Gary, wife Elaine, who tinkles the ivories, and bassman Andy Stone complement rather than get in each other's way. Nobody really plays lead, but with Andrew Proudfoot's hammering holding everything together some nice individual touches surface every now and again.

But the overall impression I get is that Clicks are a bit too self-conscious. A lot of the songs are wordy, doomy, gloomy without having the intensity concentrated enough in one area to cut through the bizarro blanket. If the vocals were stronger (if Captain Beefheart came in as singer) or if there was a lead solo instrument (if Gary stepped out a little) I suspect the combo would make more sense.

The nagging feeling, substantiated by the obliqueness of 'Lies Don't Talk', is that obscurity and weirdness is the aim rather than an incidental result. Conveying a straightforward idea in a difficult way is easy; it's doing the reverse that's the trick.

IAN RAVENDALE